READING THE NARRATOR READING BOETHIUS: THE IMPLIED AUDIENCE OF *THE KINGIS QUAIR*[1]

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The Kingis Quair, traditionally attributed to James I, King of Scotland from 1406-1437, is one of the most engaging late medieval English dream visions. Surviving in a unique manuscript copy dating from the fourth quarter of the fifteenth century (ca. 1488), the poem is composed of 197 rhyme royal stanzas totaling 1,339 lines.[2] In the poem, the poet through first-person narration recounts the love adventures of a prisoner who spies a lady in a garden from his prison tower, immediately falls in love with her and, after she leaves his sight, passes the day in torment. Weary from love longing, he falls asleep, has a dream in which he meets in turn the goddesses Venus, Minerva, and Fortune, and wakes from the dream still imprisoned and insecure, though hopeful of attaining his beloved. The poet frames this love story and dream vision with a prologue of 19 stanzas and an epilogue of 15, in which the narrator discusses respectively how he came to write the story and how his fortune has changed since the dream. The poem also includes certain details of the narrator's capture as a youth and his life as a prisoner that suggest parallels between the narrator and what we know of James I's own experience as a prisoner of the English from 1406 until his marriage to Lady Jane Beaufort in 1424.[3]

Critics have long been intrigued by the poet's effort to wed conventional courtly poetics to a description of what appears to be either an autobiographical or biographical situation. Much of the early criticism of the poem centered particularly on authorship and biographical elements to the exclusion of poetics, the most noted perhaps being C.S. Lewis's oft-quoted observation in *The Allegory of Love* that in the poem "the literal narrative of a contemporary wooing emerges from romance and allegory" (237).[4] Since John Preston's 1956 article, most critics have minimized the autobiographical question, concentrating instead on the poem's conventional poetic elements. In particular, several critics have explored various interpretive issues raised by the poet's use of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, in

general arguing that *The Quair* offers either an imitation of Boethius's text or a response to it.[5] In this essay, I shall also focus on the relationship between *The Consolation* and James's poem, but with intent slightly different from that of previous scholars. I wish to explore the poet's sense of audience by paying attention to what the narrator says when he reads Boethius and to what Minerva says when she paraphrases his words. Both instances invite us to consider the poet's implied audience, and both suggest a range of interpretive possibilities to which I turn at the end of this essay.

Before proceeding to the texts, though, I wish to define some terms that are key to my discussion. Following Gerald Prince, I distinguish here the author, that is, the composer of the narrative, from the narrator, or teller of the narrative as inscribed in the text. Similarly, I distinguish the implied audience, that is, the audience presupposed by the author and inferred from the entire text, from the narratee, or audience of the narrator as inscribed in the text ("Introduction" 7-25; *Dictionary* 8, 42-43, 57, 65-66). With some narratives, such as a personal diary, the boundaries separating author, narrator, implied audience, and narratee tend to blur; with most narratives, however, the four terms articulate fairly distinct constructs. Among medieval literary works, for instance, *The Canterbury Tales* offer a clear example of the distinction between Chaucer the author, who composed the entire text, and Chaucer the pilgrim-narrator, who in recounting a springtime journey to Canterbury struggles to tell a tale acceptable to his fellow pilgrims (Donaldson 1-3). Similarly, we can distinguish between Chaucer's implied audience for the entire work, the pilgrim-narrator's narratee, whom he encourages to "chese another tale" (MPr I.3177), and the pilgrim-narrators and their pilgrim narratees traveling on the road to Canterbury.[6] Such distinctions, based in structuralist poetics, are particularly useful when dealing with a text such as *The Kingis Quair*, with its mixture of poetic conventions and apparent biographical detail.

Turning again, then, to the texts at hand, we can say that Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* is arguably *The Quair*'s chief intertext, as again several recent critics have suggested. Like many medieval dream visions, *The Quair* is patterned in part on what we might call "the consolation genre." In Boethius's *Consolation*, the narrator initially experiences a state of confusion as he sorrows over the loss of good fortune. Philosophy appears to him in his prison cell and conducts him on an intellectual journey that restores the correct

understanding of his human nature (i.e., the soul does not die with the body), of the purpose of all things (i.e., to return to the Good), and of how the world is governed (i.e., by Providence or the Good emanating into time through Fate). As Philosophy strives progressively to heal the narrator's initial confusion with the medicine of knowledge, she restores his mental health, and he returns to himself with an enlightened understanding of his situation.[7]

Some years ago, Russell A. Peck outlined the paradigm underlying *The Consolation* in four steps: first, the narrator experiences "psychological turmoil...presented as an illness"; second, the narrator meets characters who are "projections of different fragments of himself or his environment"; third, an exchange takes place, often between the narrator and the characters, in which the narrator (or the audience) receives "a series of partial revelations" concerning his situation; and fourth, after a final revelation, the narrator returns home or to himself (xi-xii). As Peck observes, several Middle English poets, including the *Pearl*-poet, Chaucer, and John Gower, adopt this paradigm in their vision texts. Following Chaucer and Gower, whom he honors as "my maisteres dere" (1373), James I adopts the paradigm in his poem as well and, in dream visions such as *The Kingis Quair*, the second and third steps take place within the framework of a dream.

In addition to drawing on this paradigm as a structuring device, James directly introduces *The Consolation of Philosophy* itself in *The Quair*'s prologue. Echoing his master Chaucer, whose sleepless narrators in *The Book of the Duchess* (44-49) and *The Parliament of Fowls* (17-21) read books before finally falling asleep, James opens his poem with a sleepless narrator who, rather casually, "toke a boke to rede apon a quhile" (14) in an effort, as he says later, to "borrow a sleep" (30). Unfortunately for the narrator, the book is Boethius's *Consolation* and, instead of the desired effect, reading makes him more wakeful. So, reflecting on what he has read about the workings of Fortune, he decides to tell his own experience with the fickle goddess and thus commences his story, which ironically centers, in part, on a time when he did fall asleep.

When we turn to what the narrator says about *The Consolation* in the prologue, we encounter a curious phenomenon. As we read lines 8-63, we observe the narrator read Boethius, or perhaps more precisely, we read the narrator's reading of Boethius. Upon introducing the text (8-21), the narrator summarizes its contents, focusing principally on Boethius's loss of good fortune and subsequent recovery at the hands of

Philosophy (22-42). Boethius, the narrator rightly observes, turns from "unsekir warldis appetitis" (40) to rely on his own virtue, as Philosophy instructs. The narrator then observes that the text is "So full of fruyte and rethorikly pykit, / Quhich to declare my scole is ouer yong;/ Therefore I lat him pas..." (45-47). With his eyes smarting "for studying" (51), he sets Boethius aside; however, as noted already, his reading has activated his mind, and he remains unable to sleep. What follows is instructive. He says:

> This mater new in my mynd rolling:
> This is to seyne, how that eche estate
> As Fortune lykith thame will translate.
>
> For sothe it is, that on hir tolter quhele
> Every wight cleverith in his stage,
> And failyng foting oft, quhen hir lest rele—
> Sum up, sum doune—is none estate nor age
> Ensured, more the prynce than the page;
> So uncouthly hir werdes sche deuidith,
> Namly in youth, that seildin ought providith. (54-63)

The narrator presents, here, a fairly clear literal reading of Fortune's power, as Philosophy describes her in Book 2, Prose 1-Meter 2 (174-85), for it is Dame Fortune's nature to change toward those who clamber onto her wheel. Yet he also overlooks Boethius's "fruyte," that is, how to overcome adverse fortune. As Philosophy articulates, the gifts of fortune—wealth, honor, power, pleasure, fame—are external and transitory; they fail to lead to lasting happiness, which only lies in self-possession. She asserts, "si tui compos fueris, possidebis quod nec tu amittere umquam velis nec fortuna posit auferre" [if you possess yourself, you have something you will never want to give up and something which Fortune cannot take from you] (2.P4.74-77, 196). Instead of self-possession, the narrator simply mentions "how sche [i.e., Fortune] was first my fo, / and eft my frende" (66-67). Perhaps he sets aside *The Consolation* prematurely, apparently having only read through Book 2, meter 2; perhaps he misunderstands Boethius's point because his "scole is ouer yong" (46). Regardless, he seems to commence his own text based upon a partial reading of Boethius.

While the narrator's reading of Boethius seems incomplete at the beginning, again perhaps because he closed the text too soon, the poet

obviously knows Boethius well. In a sense, James keeps *The Consolation* open when his narrator closes it, and the text lurks beneath the surface of the narrator's story in passages ranging from the lovers in Venus's heaven who complain against Fortune "and hir grete variance" (646) to the appearance of the goddess herself near the dream's end (1102-1204). In one particularly important episode, *The Consolation* almost fully resurfaces when, in his dream flight to the heavens, the narrator meets Minerva in her starry house after first visiting Venus. Upon the narrator's arrival at Minerva's house, the goddess immediately begins to advise him on how to attain his beloved, whom Venus has called his "'glad and goldyn floure'" (796). Minerva initially counsels the narrator to set his love on virtue, to submit to God who governs all, to ground his work upon Christ (the "'corner-stone'," [908]), to be steadfast and diligent, and to be patient. She then attacks those who feign love, laments their doubleness and inconstancy, and advises him to ground his love in God's law. The narrator replies that he loves his lady above everything else, he will honor her, and he desires her more than other earthly joys. Minerva responds that desire is good if grounded in "'Cristin wise'" (989), to which the narrator replies that he will not jeopardize the lady's honor. At this point Minerva launches into a discourse on fortune, necessity, and free will, and it is here where *The Consolation* surfaces once again. The goddess then suggests Fortune's power is dependent directly upon foreknowledge, stating: "'And quhare a persone has tofore knawing, / Off it that is to falle purposely, / Lo, Fortune is bot wayke in suich thing'" (1030-32). But, she continues, because he is weak and feeble, the narrator is likely to suffer at Fortune's hands so, for Venus's sake and out of compassion for him, she advises him: "'Pray Fortune help, for much unlikely thing / Full oft about sche sodeynly dooth bring'" (1049-50). The narrator then leaves Minerva, returns to earth, and submits himself to Fortune before waking from his dream.

Much of Minerva's counsel seems appropriate, which encourages critics to associate her with wisdom-figures such as Lady Philosophy and biblical Sapientia. When reading the critics chronologically, for instance, we find they progressively interpret her more positively: for John MacQueen, in 1961, Minerva "corresponds" to Boethius's Philosophy (121); for Andrew von Hendy, in 1965, she *is* Philosophy (147); for Lois Ebin, in 1974, she is greater than Philosophy because she "teaches man virtue, which . . . prepares him to confront Fortune" (336); and for Michael Cherniss, in 1987, she is biblical Sapientia

herself, who, however, "says nothing which would not be appropriate to Boethius's rational philosophy" (204). Yet, curiously, unlike Boethius's Philosophy, Minerva counsels subjection to Fortune.[8] Philosophy, on the other hand, argues that happiness, worldly or otherwise, can never be attained by pursuing the external things that Fortune offers. Indeed, in the Boethian framework, it is only by removing oneself from Fortune's power through the exercise of reason that one becomes truly free and happy. By advising the narrator to petition Fortune for success in his pursuit of the lady, *The Quair's* Minerva seems to counter the path of reason presented by Philosophy.

These instances – the narrator's incomplete reading of Boethius and Minerva's subsequent counsel to the narrator to subject himself to Fortune – raise a puzzling question: why is it that James seems to have gotten Boethius wrong? Three possible responses to his apparent mishandling of Boethius suggest themselves, each with different ramifications for what is here the central question concerning audience. First, we can ignore the discrepancies and credit James for imitating Boethius as best he could: an approach that has its appeal, as many critics in the past have argued. Regarding audience, however, this response tends to treat the poem as autobiography rather than distinguish between James and his narrator (i.e., they are the same); thus, it also does not distinguish between his inscribed narratee and his implied audience – this audience, then, closes *The Consolation* when the narrator does. Second, we can acknowledge the discrepancies and argue that James did not intend to imitate Boethius; rather, he set out to re-write *The Consolation* to fit his own experience. This response, too, is appealing, as Ebin and others have suggested. Yet like the first, it tends to elide distinctions between author and narrator, implied audience and inscribed narratee. Third, we can acknowledge the discrepancies and argue that James intended them in order to set up a naïve narrator, who tells his tale to an equally naïve narratee. In this case, the implied audience and the inscribed narratee are also distinct: the narratee assents entirely to the narrator's tale and closes Boethius's text when the narrator does; the implied audience, however, responds to the narrator's tale with one eye frequently glancing at Boethius's text, which lies open, metaphorically of course, on the implied audience's lap.

Though the poem can support all three responses to James's handling of Boethius, I favor the third when considering the question of audience. This third response fits certain dream vision conventions that

allow for ironic readings of first-person narrators. James's master Chaucer, for instance, is noted for his naïve, ironic, narrators in his dream visions (Bethurum 511-20). Similarly, in *Confessio Amantis*, Gower—James's other acknowledged master—comically undercuts his lover-narrator when, after the long confession with Genius, Venus offers the narrator a mirror in which he sees himself as he is: an old man with "heres hore" (8.2831) and not the young lover he imagined. And in *Reson and Sensuallyte*, John Lydgate—arguably James's third, though unacknowledged, master—also comically undercuts his narrator when the latter repeats the Judgment of Paris, with all its moral implications (994-2112). Moreover, this third response to the question accounts more fully than the other two for the discrepancies between Boethius's text and *The Kingis Quair* by positing a possible comic reading of the poem: that is, the poet intends an incomplete reading to underscore the narrator's "wayke and feble" wit (1041), as Minerva has it. Finally, it accounts somewhat for the narrator's mental state as he progresses through the dream, culminating in his response to Fortune herself just before he wakes.

The narrator's progress through his dream indicates a deteriorating mental condition for, upon visiting each goddess, his rational faculty seems to grow progressively weaker. His lack of rational freedom reaches its depths when, upon arriving at Fortune's abode, he quakes with such fear that the goddess observes "Thou art to feble of thy self to streche, / Upon my quhele, to clymbe or to hale / Withouten help" (1179-81). Fortune's appearance and speech in the dream is likely to raise an eyebrow or inspire a chuckle among those in the audience familiar with *The Consolation*. Having been reminded of Philosophy's discourse on Fortune earlier in the poem, such an audience would likely recall, for instance, Philosophy's description of Fortune's nature and effect on humans who submit to her power. As Philosophy reminds the complaining Boethius:

> aequo animo toleres oportet quidquid intra fortunae aream geritur, cum semel iugo eius colla submiseris .... Fortunae te regendum dedisti; dominae moribus oportet obtemperes. Tu vero volventis rotae impetum retinere conaris? At, omnium mortalium stolidissime, si manere incipit, fors esse desistit.

> [when once you have submitted your neck to her yoke, it is right that you bear with equanimity whatever is offered to you on Fortune's ground.... You have given yourself to Fortune's rule; it is proper that you comply with the lady's customs. Will you, in fact, try to stop the rush of her revolving wheel? But, o most foolish of all mortals, if it begins to stop, she ceases to be fortune.] (II.Pr.1.49-51, 54-62, 178)

James's implied audience, it would seem, understands Fortune's nature and her effects. When the dreamer-narrator of *The Quair* embraces Fortune instead of following Philosophy's path to intellectual liberty, his action has a comic effect on the audience. Once placed upon the wheel by the goddess herself, he is completely under her power. After admonishing the narrator to "'hald thy grippis'" (1194) and warning him that "'my quhele be rollit as a ball / . . . quhen me likith, up or doune to fall'" (1199, 1202), Fortune tweaks his ear and the dreamer wakes. Though ambiguous, this end of the dream suggests that the object of his desire, the lady, may be ephemeral. For, if submission to Fortune is the best way for the narrator to "Atteyne vnto that glad and goldyn floure" (796), then the audience might conclude the "floure" – Fortune's gift – is mutable and most probably will wilt before long. Or, at the very least, the audience might conclude that the narrator's desire will change, if not die, when Fortune's wheel turns again as it must.

Paying attention to the narrator when he reads Boethius, and to Minerva when she discourses about Fortune, suggests that the narrator does not fully understand *The Consolation of Philosophy*. James, however, knows Boethius well, and he seems to want his implied audience, which he assumes is also familiar with *The Consolation*, to catch the narrator's incomplete reading. Implicitly, James encourages this audience to use Boethius as a standard against which to measure the narrator's own story. In this way, James evinces a playful, comical treatment of his narrator as he invites his audience to examine the workings of Boethian Fortune in the life of an individual.

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Notes

[1] The first paper I heard Norm Hinton give was on Chaucer, and I first became aware of Bob Kindrick through his work on Henryson. Both Norm and Bob generously welcomed me to the profession while I was still a graduate student and encouraged my work on late medieval poetry during those early years. I was privileged to organize the 2005 MAM sessions at the 40th International Congress on Medieval Studies in Bob's honor, which sadly turned to sessions in his memory after he died. I am pleased to offer this essay on James the I's *The Kingis Quair*—a Scots and Chaucerian poem—to honor and thank Bob and Norm for their many kindnesses.

[2] For a description and facsimile of the manuscript, see Boffey and Edwards. On another point, one of two theories about the origin of the term "rhyme royal" has an interesting association with *The Kingis Quair*. Chaucer was first to use the stanza form of seven decasyllabic lines rhyming *ababbcc*. Apparently, however, the term "rhyme royal" was not used in written text to describe the stanza until some 200 years later in Gascoigne's *Certayne Notes*, 1575. The first of two theories about the term's origin suggests that, because the stanza form was often used in events honoring royalty, it acquired this name by custom. The second, perhaps more attractive, theory suggests that the term was invented to describe the stanza form used by James I in *The Kingis Quair*, that is, "royal" because it was used by a king. Though MacCracken convincingly questions the second in favor of the first (31-32), it is difficult to know with certainty which, if either, theory is correct (Stevens and Brogan 1065-66).

[3] There is some merit to the notion of autobiography. James I was captured as a boy of eleven or twelve and held by the English for nineteen years. As part of his ransom agreement, he married Lady Joan Beaufort (Balfour-Melville 28-105). Those who read the poem as autobiography argue that it recounts, in courtly language and theme, the relationship between James and Joan before their marriage and his subsequent release from captivity. The poem's most recent editors, for instance, hold that James was author (Norton-Smith xix-xxv; Boffey 90-91; Mooney and Arn 17). Line references to Boffey's edition are cited parenthetically hereafter within the text.

[4] For a more recent autobiographical study, see Bain ("A Valentine," 232-43).

[5] See Markland 273-86; Rohrberger 301-32; MacQueen 117-31; Bain, "Nightingale," 19-29; von Hendy 141-51; Brown 246-52; Scheps 143-65; Ebin 321-41; Spearing 185; Quinn 332-55; Carretta 14-28; Cherniss 193-210; James 95-118.

[6] Hereafter, in-text line references to Chaucer's poetry will be to editions in Benson's *Riverside Chaucer*.

[7] Hereafter, in-text references to Boethius's *Consolation* will be to Loeb edition; translations are mine.

[8] On this crux, Cherniss writes: "It seems a bit odd that Divine Wisdom should have to appeal to mere worldly Fortune for help; apparently what James wishes to suggest here is that, since worldly events (*auenturis*) are unpredictable, the wisest course available to one whose worldly happiness depends upon the favorable outcome of such events is to hope for good fortune" (n.25, 251). This attempt to reconcile Boethius with Minerva's counsel does not seem to hold up to a close comparison with *The Consolation*.

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